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Biotechnology

Biotech Wheat Test Planting in Germany

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Report Highlights:

For the first time ever, biotech wheat has been planted into a field for test purposes in Germany on April 6, 2004. Syngenta, the biotech company, has permission to plant their fusarium tolerant biotech wheat on two test plots in the Northeast of Germany. One week prior to the planting of the biotech wheat, international Greenpeace activists had destroyed one test plot by spreading organic wheat seeds. Several suits have been filed against these Greenpeace activists.

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Biotech Wheat seeded on a Test Plot in Germany

In March 2004, Syngenta received approval from the Robert-Koch Institute to conduct deliberate release tests for biotech wheat on two different fields in Sachsen-Anhalt (a state in eastern Germany). One of the fields is near Bernburg and owned by the State Research Institute for Agriculture and Horticulture (Landesanstalt fuer Landwirtschaft und Gartenbau). The second field is located about ten kilometers away in Baalberge and owned by a private farm cooperative.

Syngenta is permitted to plant its fusarium tolerant biotech wheat on about 70 square meters (sqm) in each field. These biotech wheat plots are required to be surrounded by a five meter buffer zone of conventional wheat, which is then surrounded by a five meter buffer zone of fallow land. The combined area of the biotech wheat test plot and wheat buffer zone amounts to about 400 sqm in Bernburg and an intended 450 sqm in Baalberge. The test plots are located in large-scale rapeseed fields. The wheat will be harvested manually. After the harvest, the test plot is to be treated with herbicide and the remaining plant material has to be chopped into small parts and plowed under. The wheat that is not used for further tests must be destroyed by incineration.

On March 29, prior to the test plots being planted, 130 Greenpeace activists from nine different nations came by bus from Hamburg to Bernburg and Baalberge to destroy the test plots. The Greenpeacers were equipped with spades, shovels, a rotary cultivator and other tools. They also brought a truck with five tons of organic wheat seed, reportedly the Oekostar winter wheat variety (Syngenta is still verifying the exact variety). In Baalberge the activists destroyed the test plot completely by working the field with the rotary cultivator, placing the wheat seed at different depths in the soil and repeatedly driving the truck over the test field, as well as the neighboring rapeseed field.

According to Syngenta, local farmers and other neighbors watching the Greenpeace action were extremely angry with Greenpeace. The people were especially angry that the activists were coming from far distant cities and countries to destroy fields and eventually risk jobs in this agriculturally dominated region. The State of Sachsen-Anhalt is the cradle of plant breeding in Germany. Many German seed breeders had their roots in this region before they moved west during the cold war.

Syngenta, in consultation with the local authorities, decided that a test planting of biotech wheat was no longer possible on the Baalberge field. In Bernburg, the Greenpeacers were not as destructive as in Baalberge. Therefore, Syngenta deeply plowed the Bernburg test plot, as well as an additional 100m around the test plot, in effort to limit the growth of the wheat variety planted by Greenpeace. On April 6, 2004, Syngenta, in cooperation with the State Research Institute for Agriculture and Horticulture, planted its fusarium tolerant biotech wheat on the Bernburg test plot. This is the first time that biotech wheat has been planted in Germany. This fusarium tolerant biotech variety is designed to protect the wheat from mold, especially during damp warm weather. On April 6, only one Greenpeace activist was present in Bernburg.

The message that biotech wheat has been planted for test purposes in Germany hit the radio and TV news, and also made it onto the front pages of a number of newspapers. The reports were presented mainly in a factual manner. According to Syngenta, only the evangelist church reported negatively about Syngenta's test.

During the March 29 Greenpeace action, the local police obtained and reported the names and addresses of the Greenpeace activists. Four law suits have already been filed against these activists, one by the farm cooperative, one by the State Research Institute, one by the

State of Sachsen-Anhalt and one by the local police. Syngenta itself is also considering filing a suit against the activists.

In 2003, Syngenta had also received permission to test plant its biotech wheat in the State of Thuringen. However, Greenpeace prevented the seeding by destroying the field in much the same way they did in Baalberge. Syngenta appears to be sending a message in 2004 that they will not allow Greenpeace to deter their research.